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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the use of the Internet in writing instruction in English as a foreign language (EFL). Subjects were 24 students majoring in English at a Taiwan college. At the beginning of the writing course, several Internet program were introduced to all the students, and students were reminded of the potential for use of the Internet throughout the course, although only one Internet-related assignment was required. Participating students answered an open-ended questionnaire at semester's end. Results indicate positive student attitudes toward use of the Internet for writing instruction, with access to computers and the nature of assignments seen as significant factors in Internet use. It is recommended that the school make Internet-access facilities more accessible and reliable, and that teachers modify assignments to take advantage of student enthusiasm and communication and research needs. The questionnaire is appended. (MSE)

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Internet Assisting EFL Writing Learning: From Learners' Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigated English as a foreign language learners' use of internet in assisting their writing learning. Twenty-four students majoring in English at a college in Taiwan participated in this study. At the beginning of the writing class, several internet programs were introduced to all the students. Internet in assisting writing learning (IAWL) was reminded along the semester; while only one assignment was required during the semester. At the end of the semester, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to the participants for their opinions and evaluation of internet assisting writing learning. The results show that students have positive attitudes toward the IAWL approach. The key factor underlying internet use frequency is the accessibility of computers. Assignments play another important role in maintaining students' basic use. The school is suggested to provide more easy-accessible computer facilities as well as more reliable computerizing environments. Moreover, teachers are suggested to modify their instruction with necessary assignments by taking advantage of students' ambition and needs for communication and information search.

Internet Assisting EFL Writing Learning: From Learners' Perspective

Computer assisting writing development has gained variable feedback in learners' achievement, or learners' affective factor from first language, second language, and foreign language fields. Recently with the fast advancement of computer technology from learner-isolated word processor only to incorporating network function, many language educators have tried to take advantage of these techniques in assisting students' writing learning. Several studies have shown networked settings produce positive effects on learners' writing development (Braine, 1997; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). However, the effect internet assisting writing learning (IAWL) in English as a foreign language area is still not certain. English as a foreign language learners are those who are not able and not have to use English in daily life. They are in the surroundings where English is not used often. Apparently, English as a foreign language (EFL) writing learning differs from English as a second language (ESL) or as a native language (ENL) in numerous ways, including the target language learning environment, learner factors, and technology using context. Consequently, although consulting the experience in ESL or in ENL (English as native language learning), the EFL IAWL situation needs to be investigated independently.

This study tried to find out some reality of EFL students' IAWL. Conducting a research with 24 intermediate-level EFL writing learners in Taiwan, the research tried to find out answers for the following four questions: (1) What is the situation of EFL students' internet use? (2) What are the reasons underlying their use? (3) What are students' general feelings toward using internet in writing learning? (4) What are students' opinions of using internet in helping their writing learning?

Recent Research on Computer Assisting Writing Learning

Sullivan and Pratt (1996) compared students in two ESL writing environments: a networked computer-assisted classroom and a traditional oral classroom. They used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to determine 38 ESL learners' attitudes towards writing with computers, writing apprehension, writing quality, and types/patterns of discourse in two differently set writing environments. The findings show that writing environment had not effect on attitudes toward writing with computers or writing apprehension, but did have improved writing quality in the computer-assisted classroom. Moreover, the study found that in the computer-assisted classroom, teacher's role was minimized during large group discussions; student comments were more focused during peer response group sessions.

Braine also compared 69 ESL students in two contexts, a networked computer class and in a traditional lecture-style class, to examine which setting promoted better writing, more improvement in writing, and more peer and teacher feedback. The study found that the networked setting promoted better writing and more peer and teacher feedback, but less improvement in writing. According to the author; however, the less improvement in writing in the networked setting was because that those students' first drafts were closer to their maximal performance than the drafts in the traditional lecture-style setting.

In students' opinions about the effect of computer on writing, Hubbard (1997) used neural network analysis to analyze 30 native-speaking community college students' essays on this topic. The result showed that students admire and fear the use of computers in writing learning at the same time.

From the research above, network assisting writing in ESL seems have gained more positive results than negative ones in terms of writing achievement and classroom discourse. However, in EFL writing, few studies are done in this area. Even fewer are found about internet assisting writing. Hyland (1993) in his study gave a warning that "... the full potential of computer-assisted writing remains largely unrealized in ELT [English Language Teaching] (p. 21)." Because of the less force from computer assisting environment, and because the current EFL education being learner centered, learners' feelings need to be concerned at top priority. In order to solve the myth of computer assisting EFL writing learning, the current study first investigated EFL learners' use of and attitudes toward a hot topic in current computer assisting EFL writing, which is, internet assisting writing learning.

Method

Participants

Twenty four English major college students in Taiwan participated in this study. Each one of them has learned English as a foreign language for at least eight years. They took advanced English writing class in junior year. The average English writing level of these participants were intermediate based on the ACTFL writing proficiency standard. Typing skills are essential for the students in this department. However, computer skills are not requirements in this department. The school has one public computer lab, which consists of four computer rooms. The computer rooms sometimes are reserved as computer classrooms.

Procedure

At the beginning of the advanced writing course, the researcher, the teacher, spent two hours in the computer lab, teaching all the students how to use internet programs, including emails, Netscape, and the BBS (Bulletin Board System) posting. In order to familiarize the students with the internet use, the instructor encouraged the students to email their teachers and peers in English, do research through Netscape to collect data to enrich their writing portfolio. Also, the teacher required all students to post their midterm writing product on the BBS. During the semester, the teacher reminded the students twice of the possibilities of using internet programs in assisting their writing learning.

In order to prevent students' feedback from being hindered by the uneasiness of face-to-face interviews by the teacher; also, in order to gather as much students' feedback, at the end of the semester, the researcher used a paper-pencil open-ended questionnaire (Appendix 1) as the data collecting tool. The teacher distributed the questionnaires to all the students and encouraged them to write as much feedback as they want. Students were told to write down their opinions anonymously and were ensured that the feedback won't influence their course scores because the completed questionnaires would be delivered by a student to the departmental office and be kept there until the teacher turned in all the students' course scores. It took about half an hour for all the students to complete the questionnaires. While the students were responding to the questionnaires, the teacher walked out of the classroom to avoid any influence on the students' responses.

About two weeks later, the researcher took back the completed questionnaires from the English departmental office after she turned in students' scores and started the analysis work.

Data Analysis

The collected data was read carefully and categorized based on the study questions. The students' responses in each category were then tabulated in order to reveal the tendency of students' general opinions on each question. Moreover, the responses were synthesized at the last stage to picture students' general situation of and attitudes toward using IAWL.

Results

The categorized results from the open-ended questionnaire were described and summarized in order to identify the answers for the study questions: (1) What is the situation of the students' internet use? (2) What are the reasons underlying their use? (3) What are students' general feelings for using internet in writing learning? (4) What are students' opinions of using internet in writing learning?

Students' Internet Use Situation

When asked about the use frequency of the internet programs during the semester, five of the 24 students (21%) responded less than 25% of their study time was spent on internet use. Seven of all the respondents (29%) spent 26% to 50% of their study time in internet use, four (17%) 51% to 75%, and six (25%) 76% to 96%. Two of the 24 (8%) respondents did not respond on this question. The use frequencies of the students are wide spread. Ten (4/24), fifty (3/24), and eighty (4/24) percents are the three peaks. This shows students' use frequencies of IAWL vary (see Figure 1).

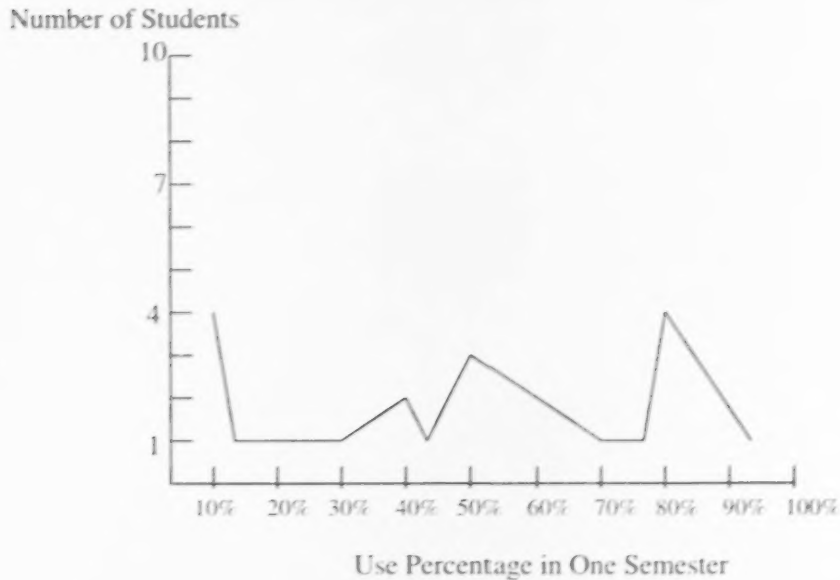


Figure 1. Use frequency distribution of the participants in one semester. Twenty-two of the 24 participants answered the question.

When asked about the most frequently used internet programs, Netscape obtained 13 votes, email ten, BBS five, the Neterm one, and the Internet Explore one. Three of the 24 respondents did not answer this question (Table 1). Students' most frequently used program is the Netscape, and the second, the email.

Table 1.

Students' Most Frequently Used Internet Programs

Program Name	Number of Students
Netscape	13
Email	10
BBS	4
Neterm	1
No answer	3

Note. 1. Students can write down more than one program in answering this question.
 2. Total response student number: 21

Reasons Underlying Students' Use of Internet

In identifying the reasons underlying the students' use of internet, this study searched for the reasons underlying the frequent versus seldom use of computers and the reasons for the use of the three most frequently used programs.

Reasons underlying the frequent versus seldom use of computers

Half of the respondents (two out of four) who indicated frequent use of computers said that they have personal computer at room; while the other half said they needed to use computers for their assignments. "Because I have personal computer at my own room, I can use internet programs pretty often. Consequently, I depend on the computer very much", wrote one student. Another student merely wrote, "to hand in assignments".

The reasons for those students who seldom used computers include: no internet facilitation in personal computers, no personal computers, time limit, personal perception of time wasting, and the long wait outside the computer lab. "Because I don't have the internet program in my personal computer, I have to use the computers in the computer lab at school. Because I am always busy, I seldom go to the computer lab", wrote an respondent.

The results show that the main factors underlying students' use of computers include the easy access to the computers and internet programs, and the requirements of course work. On the other hand, the main factors undermining students' use of computers may include: students' perceived busy schedule (2/5), and the extra work to go to the computer lab (3/5), including the wait for the use of the Netscape at the lab.

Reasons for the use of the three most frequently used programs

The reasons for the use of the three most frequently used programs will be discussed in descendent order from the top-ranked program, the Netscape.

Netscape: More than half of the respondents (table 1) said they used the Netscape most frequently. The reason most often mentioned (8/13) is to look for new and interesting activities and information. "I have to get some information or just look around to see something new or interesting", said one respondent. Another respondent said, "I use Netscape to find some new activities or information."

In addition to the interest in searching for new information, other reasons exist. "I want to get some information, data and reports not only for the writing class, but also for other classes.", wrote one respondent. And another wrote: "I need to get to the Netscape to look for information or data for my term papers." Apparently, the requirement of

handling in information oriented assignments has increased the students' use frequency of Netscape. Some students like to play on the Netscape for fun and out of curiosity. "I like to play the Netscape to see what is inside. I am curious about its function.", wrote one respondent.

From the results shown above, the search for new information plays the main role (8/13) for the students who used the Netscape. Minor reasons include the search for the information to fulfill assignments (3/13), and being for fun and for curiosity (1/13).

Email: The second most frequently used program is the email (table 1). The overpoweringly stated reason is to send letters to classmates, good friends, foreign pen pals, and teachers. "I like to use email because I can use it to communicate with my friends, teachers or classmates. The communication can be speeded up; also, I can get hold of the one I need to at emergency, which is what ordinary mails can not do.", wrote one respondent. Another response is, "exchange messages with my friends from other countries --- fast". Also, another respondent wrote, "interacting with teachers by email can be more personal, which helps me to ask questions." Another reason relates with English ability improvement. "Email is one of the excellent ways of practicing English writing. It can express one's thought without being limited in certain topic. Also, it can help us write in English thought.", wrote one of the respondents. Another response goes as, "I use email frequently to communicate with foreign pen pals. I can share lots of things with them and improve my English writing abilities." Only one student wrote, "there is other teachers' requests for receiving my assignment through email."

From the analysis, the main reason underlying the students' use of emails is the efficient and convenient feature of emails in communication (17/23); while other reasons include improving English ability (5/23), and fulfilling teachers' requirements (1/23).

BBS: The third most frequently used program, although much less than the previous two, Netscape and email, is the BBS (table 1). "To do the homework" is the reason most frequently stated (3/5). On the other hand, one respondent wrote, "I like to share my experience on BBS because it takes longer for the Netscape to come out on the screen; besides, I don't have my friends' email addresses." Also, one student wrote, "I like to see my classmates' articles posted on the BBS, to see what they have to say."

It seems that students use the BBS mainly to fulfill teachers' requirement (3/5). Other reasons include, to look at classmates' articles, and to express one's opinions while other programs are not easy to access to.

Students' Feelings/Comments for Network Assisting Writing

The student respondents stated various comments in expressing their feelings for IAWL. The responses were analyzed and categorized into two parts: the positive comments, and the negative comments.

The positive comments

The most often mentioned positive comments are about the quality, or the use of the internet programs, which includes the usefulness, and convenience of the programs. One student wrote, "the function of internet is multiple-directed. We can even find writing tutors in writing studios to help our English writing." Other student stated, "the use of networks open my eyes to the world which is full of information. It helps me learn much." Among the qualities, the convenience for communication of the Netscape and of

the email is the most popular reason. ." One of the respondents stated, "Email is a very convenient way to connect teachers and students. We don't need to hurry to the school to hand in our homework. We can just send it via the email. It's good." "It's so convenient for me to ask for the teacher's comments and feedback on my opinions and performance in class", stated another student. The speed, convenience and rich information internet programs can provide for students seem impress the respondents.

Another positive comments made by the respondents are about the trend of the world. "I learned a lot from the computer assisting composition in this semester, which has promoted me from a computer idiot to computer elementary. In the future, we need to use internet heavily. So, it's good for us to learn to use it as soon as possible.", stated one respondent. Another respondent endorsed the opinion, "I think it is necessary for everyone to learn how to make the best use of email, BBS, and Netscape because it's become a trend." Also another respondent wrote, "It's very important for a pioneer of the 21st century to become familiar with internet sources." "The use of internet assisting writing learning helps me know more about computers, which are very important in modern life", responded another student. The results show that many students acknowledge the use of IAWL because of the need to keep up with the perceived direction of the world's development.

Another responses are related with the students' reflection on their writing learning effort. "Before posting an article on the BBS, I need to consider more about the quality and property of my work. I think this can improve my writing, " stated one student. Another student wrote, "I feel I become more responsible in writing the composition I want to post on the BBS. I don't want to lose face because of my

carelessness. However, no matter how much effort I put, my writing won't be good enough." The responsibility for posted product seems make students more attentive to improve the quality of their writing product.

The negative comments

The respondents' negative comments cluster around one point: the inconvenience of the school's computer environment. "To practice it [using computers] everyday can benefit a lot, but it is impossible. In fact, we have heavy assignment load. Going to the lab is bothersome. For example, we need to line up for using computers in the library, not to mention to check others' articles on it frequently", wrote one respondent. "Good idea in using internet assisting writing learning, but only a few people have their computers. It's difficult and inconvenient for people who don't have computers", wrote another student. "It's important to know how to use, but the school computers are all bad, having serious virus problems very often, out of order frequently. Even the printers are broken all the time", stated another student. Another respondent wrote, "I really like to use internet, but seldom use them because the school's computer center is always used for teaching." "It's hard to access to internet on campus, so it's become students' burden. Although ideally it's [IAWL] excellent, in reality, there are many problems need to be solved", wrote another student. It seems that the difficulty in accessing to the computers, the poor facility of the computers at school have hindered the students from using the internet in helping their writing learning.

Another complaints are related with the use of the BBS program at school. One student wrote, "BBS is not useful, is a burden, because posting on BBS only increases the work, typing." "The BBS content of our school is poor, which won't motivate me to see

it", stated another student. And another student wrote, "The BBS operation is out of date, problematic, not practical. It's very time consuming to post an article on the computers at our school because of the machines".

Another negative comments are about the help internet can contribute to writing learning. One respondent wrote, "Not big help if students communicate in Chinese, which is quite popular here". Another respondent stated, "it's impossible to improve English writing abilities through email use, for communication is the most important thing in using emails. People won't revise their article on emails because what they want is just to get meanings across." Internet programs, especially the email, used in assisting writing learning seem need more instructional design and principals in achieving its function in order to gain students' use confidence.

Student Respondents' Suggestions

The respondents' comments are followed by their suggestions in IAWL.

The results show that students' suggestions are mainly related to the teacher's instructional method under the environment and to the school's computer environment. "Better to change computer environment" and "the department itself should own a computer lab" are the two suggestions most students gave for the school.

Students tend to give varied suggestions regarding teachers' instruction under the current environment. A student wrote, "it's not the time for all the class to use computers. Only when the computers in our school become better can this approach be promoted". Another endorsed this opinion by writing "computer is merely a tool, so, don't put it into assignment because not everyone's computer has good function". However, another student wrote, "use the computer more frequently, applying to

assignment, then, students will spend more time on it". Also, another student stated, "better not to let students choose whether to use computers for themselves because many students are too lazy to use".

Discussions

The frequencies of students' use of internet spread from 10% to 96% of their study time. The scatter of the frequencies may relate to two main reasons: the accessibility of the internet facilities and the assignments. Most of the students appreciate the convenience and excitement internet programs could bring in. However, their complaints mainly focus on the inconvenience of the school's computerizing environment. Most students who do not have their own computers suffer much from the time spent in working with problematic computers, in always-occupied computer rooms, and even in out-dated software. The inconvenience of the facilities apparently has hindered students' internet use frequency. On the contrary, those students with personal computers express the enjoyment of the approach in improving their writing. Also, they reported the frequent use of internet. Hyland (1993) in his study mentioned "...negative attitudes may result from mechanical and logistical problems...(p. 2)", and that "the positive effects of word processors in the writing class depend on the provision of a supportive learning environment (p. 21)". It is clear that the computer environment of the school needs to be improved for better results of the IAWL approach.

On the other hand, the assignments from the teacher may serve as a gatekeeper of basic use frequency of internet for writing improvement regardless of the students' use environment or students' laziness. For example, assignments provide those students who

did not use internet before with an opportunity in experiencing the program at least once (before they finish the midterm) in this study.

In this study, students' favorite internet programs mainly are the Netscape, which is for information search, and emails, for communication. Students' curiosity for the world and the convenience for communication play important roles in motivating students' use of internet programs. Although assignments help maintain the basic use frequency of certain program, the function, the content, and the accessibility of internet programs are the three main attractions for students.

As regards to students' general feelings for using internet in writing learning, according to Hubbard (1997), "students simultaneously admire and fear the use of computers for writing (p. 59)". In this study, it seems that the students who simultaneously admire and fear the use of computers are mainly those who do not own their computers. The foreseen obstacles before using the computers in the computer labs hinder these students' interests in using internet to help their writing learning. Generally, the students appear to appreciate the use of internet. This appreciation relates to the following factors: the students' curiosity and thirst for the world and information, the students' eager for communication and interaction with friends and teachers, and the students' recognition of the world trend being computer centered. Some students even acknowledge the sense of responsibility they were reminded when publishing their English writing product on the internet. However, some students are not as optimistic about the function of using internet in helping English writing learning because of the communicational language the students use most of the time being not the target language, English.

In this one-semester study, several phenomena of the students in using internet assisting EFL writing learning have been observed. Students' use situations vary mainly with the accessibility of computers. Students generally have positive attitudes toward the use of internet in helping their writing learning, especially toward the convenience internet programs are supposed to provide for fast communication and easy information search. In order to obtain better results of internet assisting EFL writing learning, the school is suggested to improve the computerizing environments and machine maintenance for students' easy access. Moreover, teachers are suggested to design the course in a way to familiarize students with internet uses according to students' nature of being communication oriented, world information curious, world trend alerting, and published product responsible. Also, the restriction on target language, English, use in daily internet use is highly recommended.

Further studies are recommended in investigating the relation between students' writing learning achievements and internet assisting EFL writing learning. Moreover, more studies among different EFL learning groups are needed on the same topic for better generalizability.

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Appendix 1

Written Questionnaire

The Use of Computer Assisting Composition

--- Email, Netscape, BBS...

1. Use frequency of this semester: ____% (use of any of the above items)

2. I used _____ (can be more than 1) most frequently

3. Reasons for the use situation

4. My feelings for computer assisting composition this semester

5. My comments and suggestions for applying computer assisting writing learning in composition courses